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ABSTRACT

An examination of any school curriculum would reveal the existence of "basic" subjects such as reading, writing, and computation. Therefore a "return to basics" is not needed but rather a change in methodology in teaching these subjects. The following methodological changes are suggested: (1) Test each child to ascertain the level of achievement in each subject and then start them in each subject area and take them as far as they can go during the school year, picking up exactly where they left off in June at the start of school in the fall; (2) Provide individualized instruction for each child by paying attention to individual needs, interests, and abilities; (3) Group children in a nongraded arrangement, by ability rather than age; and (4) Maximize the open class concept. (JD)

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"Back to Basics Mania"- Is It Hurting Our Schools?

By Jack Kaufhold

Every twenty-five years or so, a strange phenomenon occurs in this country concerning the educational system. Like a virtual Rip Van Winkle, the public awakes from a prolonged period of lethargy, rubs its eyes and sees- as if for the first time- a system which is the very core of American life, the education system.

With each "awakening", the educational system is scrutinized and a host of denunciations are forthcoming. Among the major objections usually asserted are those which call attention to the fact that students of the current generation cannot read at an acceptable level, cannot write well or compute figures well.

The charges are usually repeated through the media and at gatherings of parents and teachers and, before long, the concerns reach the level of a "national problem". Eventually, a series of statistics and figures are produced in an effort to substantiate the claims and it is announced that the educational system is in need of extensive revamping. Procedures and plans for this revamping usually come in assorted forms but the most common of these suggestions for improvement emerges in the shape of a "back to basics" curriculum or a return to the three R's.

In dealing with these concerns, there are two important

points to remember. First, denunciations of this sort are not new. We heard them in the 1930's with the advent of Progressive Education, we heard them in the 1950's when Sputnik was launched and we heard them again through the 1970's. Secondly, if the claims are valid (as much of the recent evidence seems to indicate) the solution certainly does not include a "back to basics" or a "return to the three R's" approach.

Logic of this sort appears untenable for two reasons. First, there is no real need to "return" to the three R's. To my knowledge as an educator, we never left them! I am most certain that an examination of any school curriculum in the United States would reveal the existence of "basic" subjects such as reading, writing and computation of numbers. Secondly, a "return to the three R's" approach, to my mind, is an oversimplified solution. It is as narrowminded and unrealistic as proposing a return to the horse and buggy as an answer to today's problems of pollution. In effect, a solution of this sort could set American Education back fifty years!

What is needed is not a change in the school's curriculum but a change in the implementation of that curriculum. In other words, most schools are teaching the subjects which society deems appropriate; what is needed instead is a change in the methodology used to teach these subjects.

Changes in Implementation

If schools are to succeed in preparing our children to meet the future, four distinct changes must be made in the

instructional programs. These changes are: ensuring continuous progress, providing individualized instruction, using a non-graded arrangement, and maximizing the open classroom concept.

Ensuring Continuous Progress

In order to ensure continuous progress for each student, the child must be tested first in order to ascertain his level of achievement in each subject. Following this baseline testing, each child must be started where he is in each subject area and taken as far as he can go during that school year. When the next year begins in September, the child should pick up his subjects exactly where he left off in June. At the present time, this is not done to any appreciable extent in our schools. Knowledge is tightly packaged into "grade levels" and students are allotted a year in that grade level to attain the required level of knowledge for each subject. For many students, the timing is right. In a year's time they produce enough evidence to show that they have attained the required level of knowledge. Other students are not quite as fortunate, however. They require more time and/or extra help to attain the specified level of knowledge. Nevertheless, when these students return in the Fall (assuming that they have gained enough knowledge to be promoted) they begin- not where they left off- but at a new, higher, accelerated level.

As a result of this system, students experience "gaps" in their learning. There are great portions of subjects that remain unlearned by students. Students are given no time to close these "gaps". they are simply thrust into a new race for knowledge. If one of the "gaps" is in a subject which entails

reading, writing or computing figures, the student can be in serious trouble. As the child progresses up the educational levels, the "gaps" widen and failure is imminent. A plan of continuous progress could eliminate the gaps and, therefore, reduce failure.

Providing Individualized Instruction

To be truly effective, a plan of continuous progress requires a program of individualized instruction. For hundreds of years, educators have known that all children are not the same- they learn in different ways and at different rates- this is a fundamental point of educational psychology. Yet, in the face of that fact, schools are continually organized in a lockstep fashion. Teachers insist on requiring all students to learn the same material at the same time and at the same rate.

To insist on this method, I believe, is to invite failure and thus court the possibility of a poorly-educated future generation. Students whose learning gaps widen beyond repair become dropouts- either physical dropouts or mental dropouts. What is needed is a commitment to the individual, an allowance for individual needs, individual abilities and individual differences. Critics might say that this approach is catering to the student or even coddling the child. I insist that it is merely good pedagogy. A child cannot learn if a stronger human need (love, respect, attention, esteem-to name a few) is blocking the way. In stating his "Hierarchy of Human Needs", the psychologist Abraham Maslow has expressed the belief that these needs must be met first before learning can occur.

Unfortunately, many teachers define human needs in terms of their own subject area and this could not be further from the truth. No one has a basic human need to learn the annual rainfall of Argentina. A child who comes to school hungry, for example, will give this need a priority over academic needs. A child in need of affection or attention will naturally give this need priority over subject material. In effect, this can be a major stumbling block to learning for that child. What I am saying, therefore, is that affective needs must be met first (whenever possible) before cognitive learning can take place. The attentive teacher can actually speed up cognitive learning in some individuals by first attending to affective needs.

Teachers also need to be aware of individual differences, abilities and interests in order to best educate the child. For example, it is not uncommon for a student to experience difficulty in a subject such as reading or math because he perceives no relevance to the material. The same child can experience rapid growth in a subject, however, when that subject is taught through their interest. This does not mean that the teacher has to teach each lesson 30 different ways. What I am saying is that for those students who experience difficulty through a lack of motivation, the subject can be taught effectively by taking a different route- the route through the particular child's interest. I believe that careful attention to individual needs, interests, and abilities by competent and caring teachers is the key to maximizing learning for students.

Using a Non-Graded Arrangement

If children are taught according to an individualized approach, that is, taught according to their own pace and comprehension rate, it follows that some children will take longer than the allotted school year to finish their work. What is necessary, therefore, is the elimination of the present grouping system in schools where children are grouped chronologically in grades from K to 12. Under the non-graded arrangement, the grade levels are abolished and instead of being grouped by age, the children are grouped by ability. Thus it would be possible to have a mixture of various levels (within one or two years) in the same classroom. This system can help both the rapid learner and the slow learner. A child who is advanced in a subject could progress ahead and learn that subject with students a grade level or two ahead. By the same token, a child who experiences difficulty with a subject could be given additional time and might be required to learn a subject with students of a like ability level but of a younger age.

In this way, "time limits" are taken out of the school's curriculum. Instead of the curriculum being boxed and packaged into grade levels, the boxes are removed and the curriculum is continuous and free flowing. Since there are no grade levels in this system, there is no official promotion from grade to grade and no stigmatized "failure". The lack of grade levels also eliminates the necessity for "social promotion" (promotion of an otherwise failing student because of factors such as age, height, or weight). In the present system, many teachers

face pressures for "social promotion" and they promote the student to the next grade with the knowledge that he lacks certain skills and information. As a result, the learning gaps widen and before long they become an abyss.

In the non-graded system, the slow student is neither failed nor promoted. Instead, he continues to work on the subject at his own rate until he has mastered it. A child working at his own ability level stands a good chance of achieving success in learning. If the old adage that "success breeds success" is true, the child will gain a mastery of subject material and will not become a physical or mental "dropout".

Maximizing the Open Class Concept

The chief question posed by teachers when confronted with the idea of individualization of instruction is "How Can I individualize for 20-30 students?" One answer is for the teacher to relinquish part of her teaching role as the "source of all knowledge". By this I mean that instead of all information coming through the teacher, the student should be given the opportunity and the responsibility of working on his own to learn much of what he has to learn. If we believe the psychologist Carl Rogers' statement that "the only

learning that is of real importance to an individual is that which he learns by his own efforts", then the self directed learning portion of a child's education should bring increased retention of information.

A scientifically planned and well-run open classroom with

learning centers can provide numerous advantages over present day arrangements. Through flexible scheduling and contracting, learning efficiency can be maximized and motivation can be increased. A sense of responsibility is fostered in the open setting, children learn to be responsible to themselves rather than to an authoritarian "task master" figure. In addition, the open setting allows the child to "learn how to learn", an essential skill for tomorrow's adults in the face of the increased knowledge explosion in science and technology. Finally, and most importantly, the open setting with children working independently frees the teacher and allows her to attend to individual learning problems and difficulties.

In conclusion, I am saying that there is no need to "return" to the three R's and emphasize them exclusively. With the increased knowledge and expertise of today's teachers, schools can provide much more than just the basics. To narrow the curriculum to this aim would be ludicrous and even dangerous in this fast-moving era. The solution to the current educational problems lies in individual attention to individual difficulties. Perhaps a "return to the child" would be a more fitting challenge.

Biographical Note

Dr. Jack Kaufhold is an Assistant Professor at Elmira College in Elmira, New York where he teaches Educational Psychology and is Director of the Elementary Student Teaching Program. He is a frequent writer in the field of educational theory and methodology.